

## On the Front Lines: AT and Families It's a Family Affair

### In this Issue...

For families the first steps into the lifetime labyrinth of disability information and services, including assistive technology, are necessarily tenuous. Hope and assistance, however, are available in the form of organizations dedicated to aiding families in gathering information across a spectrum of needs. Among those are the State Assistive Technology Programs, funded under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, as amended, and located throughout the United States and Territories.

Tech Act programs, as they are called, range in size and capacity, with some offering more services than others. All, however, work hard to connect parents and guardians with the information, equipment and services they need to acquire on behalf of their children. They frequently collaborate with each other, both within and across state boundaries.

Tech Act programs serve individuals of all ages and all disabilities. Among their services, they offer training and demonstrations designed to help families access a "free and appropriate public education" for their children. Assistive technology is a frequently addressed topic, as it is an area in which families often need a great deal of support – from a basic introduction to the terms and concepts to equipment trials, evaluations and assessments.

In this issue we look at AT through the eyes of an experienced Tech Act center professional.

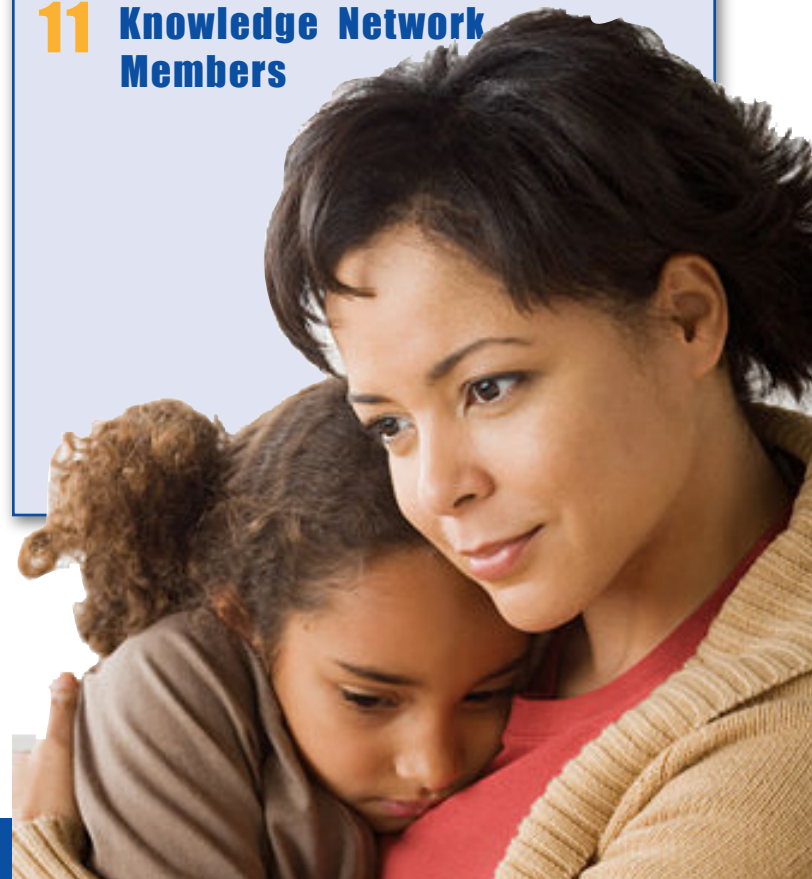
### Alice Wershing, M. Ed., ATP Speaks

Alice Wershing's younger brother is on the autism spectrum, a late-in-life diagnosis, but her inspiration for entering the AT field is derived only partially from his travails. More significant, she notes, was the attraction she felt as a middle school student for the children she encountered when volunteering in 1968 at an Association of Retarded



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Citizens school. "I wasn't yet old enough to apply for paid employment but I was old enough to know that I didn't want to spend the summer months just hanging out," she recalls.

She found her opportunity just a block and a half from her house, at the ARC school. "I became very accustomed to being with people with disabilities, especially kids," she recalls. "I was especially attracted to their openness, their willingness to learn, their desire to be free and to experience life. They were all young children. For me it was an open door that I could walk through and have a positive impact on someone's life. That these kids were so open and appreciative was an added bonus. Plus, it was fun, great fun!"

She remained at the ARC facility through her high school years. "Throughout that experience I was always interested in what the teachers who were leading us knew." By the early to mid-1970s "I became very curious about what happened to the kids once they were too old for the school." By then the nationwide deinstitutionalization movement was underway. "I wanted to know what happened to the teenagers when they reached adulthood."

Her interest in AT, she says, "came from my direct classroom experience. When I last had my own classroom, in the mid-1980s, I was trying to modify my students' curriculum, and the technology was just emerging. I could see, though, that technology would be extremely useful." Her burgeoning interest in AT was piqued. "I had many students who were unable to speak. I was continuously creating communication boards and attempting to utilize picture communication. In 1984 that was about all we could do."

Nevertheless, she adds, "I was certainly intrigued by the possibilities of AT. I began working with AT in earnest when I moved to California and was fortunate to meet Alliance for Technology Access founder Jackie Brand and get in on the ground floor of what is now the Center for Accessible Technology but was then the Disabled Children's Computer Group in Berkeley, CA."

Ms. Wershing spent seven years at C for AT before moving to her current position as educational technology coordinator at the East Tennessee Technology Access Center (ET-TAC), a Tech Act project and ATA center in Knoxville, TN, a post she has held for 14 years. With an undergraduate degree from George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University and a Masters in Education from the University of Virginia, Ms. Wershing is a credentialed teacher in special

education and elementary education. She has lectured and presented nationally and is currently an adjunct professor at the University of Tennessee/Knoxville. She has also published on the use of AT for developing literacy and play skills. In addition to being the sister of an adult with Pervasive Developmental Delay, she is conservator for an adult with multiple disabilities.

Supporting our interview with Ms. Wershing are resources emphasizing the relationship between families, AT and the organizations that provide the help and orientation families need. We also feature members of our Knowledge Network. The members spotlighted this month focus on family AT needs. We invite you to contact these members for further information. Please share this newsletter with other organizations, families and professionals who may benefit from it. We invite you to visit us at <http://www.fctd.info>. We welcome feedback, new members and all who contribute to our growing knowledge base.

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## On the Front Lines: AT and Families Islands in the Stream

*An Interview with Alice Wershing, M. Ed., ATP,  
Educational Technology Coordinator,  
East Tennessee Technology Access Center (ETTAC)*

They come to organizations like Alice Wershing's – the East Tennessee Technology Access Center (ETTAC) – seeking assistive devices for a family member, often a child in the K-12 range. But finding the right equipment is not enough. They need information about the technology they seek, and they need access to sources of funding so they can acquire that technology. They represent all of life's strata. However, many are classified as lower income and others are from the rural and mountain areas surrounding Knoxville, Tennessee, the commercial and education hub of the region and home to the University of Tennessee's main campus. They are families of individuals with disabilities, many of whom are children, and they come to ETTAC because it is an island of information and comfort in a sea of uncertainty, confusion and, often, desperation.



*Alice Wershing, M. Ed., ATP*

ETTAC, where Alice has served as educational technology coordinator for 14 years, is a Tech Act project, one of similar projects located in Tennessee and nationwide. Tennessee's five Tech Act centers are members of the Alliance for Technology Access (ATA), an affiliation which supplies them with information about AT and funding streams as well as referral families.

At ETTAC, she explains, "We work with children of all ages and all abilities. My co-worker and I are the educational team, working with school age children and visiting their schools. We are each certified teachers. There are two other individuals on our staff who do mostly vocational rehabilitation work for adults but may get pulled in to work with kids and their families in the 24 counties we serve."

The large geographic area ETTAC serves necessitates long drives to visit with families, children, schools and vendors. "My longest drive is 2 1/2 hours one way, to the Virginia/North Carolina border and as far as the Kentucky border."

### Funding Is the Key Need

When it comes to AT, Ms. Wershing says, the families' key need is for funding and for information about funding sources. "Funding for AT is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain because of the general worsening of the overall economic situation," reported Ms. Wershing



According to Ms. Wershing, the search for funding will dominate the immediate future of family oriented AT organizations. "We'll need to find those funding streams for families, especially for those counties where there are no United Way dollars or alternative funding available. That's always going to be the biggest challenge: getting the equipment people need into their hands and then helping them continue to obtain current devices as technology evolves."

To add to the funding challenge, today's economic crunch has created an increasing need among existing funding sources for justification. In some instances, she adds, "there is no funding other than families paying for the devices themselves."

Families, she explains, often assist ETTAC in fundraising. "Families have connections in the community. We have a mom who is working with one of the software programs and helping us modify some material. Other families bring us supplies. We take many kinds of donations. Some families are able to pay. We have to keep the doors open, so we offer a subscription to families. Our pricing for services is on a sliding scale."

ETTAC, she emphasizes, tries to avoid turning any family away, even if a family is unable to afford the organization's sliding-scale fee structure.

"We have several funding streams that enable us to provide service and/or information to families, one of which is the state Technology Access Program. We have United Way funding in a few of our 24 counties. We are the evaluators for two regions for the state Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. We may have other agencies that subscribe with us. It's a similar subscription to what the schools use."

### A Device Reutilization Program for the Uninsured

ETTAC's device reutilization program has a positive impact on families experiencing acute funding woes because they are uninsured. "During the past year the focus among the five Tech Act centers in Tennessee has been on developing our device reutilization program and creating either a

central location for keeping equipment or a shared location. This program allows us to take equipment that still works – it may not be current state-of-the-art equipment – and put that equipment into the hands of families that need it.”

The equipment for reutilization, she explains, is often supplied by families that are current or former ETTAC clients. “In those instances the equipment usually consists of computers and medical equipment.”



For example, one of Ms. Wershing’s clients was no longer using a lap tray because she had acquired a new wheelchair. The client brought ETTAC the lap tray from her previous wheelchair. In terms of computers, Alice she adds, “Our technician may go into the computer to swap out parts, for instance, or update a processor. For the most part the equipment comes to us as is. We clean the equipment we receive but other than that we don’t do much to it.”

Mostly, however, the devices are doled out from among equipment already in ETTAC’s possession. “Right now we are looking only at what we have here,” she says. “However, if we think another center might have a piece of equipment we need we will contact that center.”

From her perspective and that of her clients and vendors there is no consensus about when or if the current funding environment might improve.

“The environment seems to fluctuate daily. For the younger children that we work with – in the birth to age three category – there used to be early intervention and a payer of last resort that would enable a child to acquire the recommended AT. However, as the reimbursement rate for some of the suppliers has changed some of the suppliers are not getting reimbursed at a full rate. It’s been difficult to find a supplier that will order the recommended equipment knowing that there may well not be a full reimbursement.”

Part of the problem, she explains, is that much AT is not categorized as durable medical equipment and thus is not covered by insurance.

For example, she continues, “some of the single message devices that we use with young kids for accessing books or single messages may not be lumped into the category of durable medical equipment, meaning being deemed medically necessary.”

Switches and adapted toys, she adds, are often not approved because they do not meet durable medical equipment criteria. “The devices are not approved because the doctor or

presiding medical official can’t say that in an emergency situation a particular device will allow a child with disabilities to indicate whether he or she is in pain or medical distress.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests to her that other Tech Act centers and PTIs [Parent Training and Information Centers] in her state increasingly must cope with the ramifications for families as more AT devices fail to meet insurer requirements for the durable medical equipment category.

### Where There’s a Will...

Despite the worsening economic climate, changing insurance criteria and the ever-growing number of uninsured American families, ETTAC has continued to serve all of the families that come to them.

“Fortunately, there is always someone to whom we can refer families that come to us for AT assistance,” she says. “We have two people on our staff responsible for information and referral but we can often refer families to another staff member who can help.”

According to Ms. Wershing ETTAC, along with other ATA-affiliated centers, share a trait: the willingness and ability to adapt to changing circumstances and environments. “That’s what makes all of the centers the same yet different from each other because each community’s needs is very different. The needs of our respective communities drive how we are providing service and often drive the technology that we consider for potential purchase later.”

For the past five years, she notes, “We have had an increasing number of referrals from individuals with ALS. Consequently, we’ve tried to look for funding to provide additional communication devices to those individuals, especially while they are waiting to be assessed for a device or perhaps they may lack funding and we can at least offer to loan them the equipment they need for as long as they need it.”

She notes an increase in need for communication devices on the part of ALS patients as well as children in the K-12 range. ETTAC’s role, she explains “is to assist in identifying what the technology will be and then provide some information on how to obtain funding for the equipment. In the case of a communication device there has to be a speech/language pathologist involved. I’m not one and we don’t have one on our staff. Therefore, we’re often making sure that the client has a speech pathologist or can locate one who can complete the required paperwork.”

Thanks to the proximity of the University of Tennessee and Knoxville’s Children’s Hospital, “there are several speech pathologists in the Knoxville area who refer to us regularly and with whom we work often. The issue is that those thera-

pists don't always have the devices available for our clients, so we work in tandem. We can present the devices or if there is a device that's not in our possession we have a contact list of vendor representatives we can give to the family so that they can call the representatives and make appointments to see the latest technology."

### Information Please

In addition to the need for funding and information about funding sources, the most significant need among Alice's clients is for information about AT, especially about inexpensive options, devices that are readily available. To meet such requests she refers families to a list of websites from which they can download free resources.

She also refers families and colleagues to websites like that maintained by the Family Center on Technology and Disability (FCTD). "I've found the FCTD website to be a consistently very valuable AT information source."

When families approach her about possibly finding a lower-tech, less expensive alternative to a specific device, she finds it difficult to comply with that request, she says. "When we make recommendations in a report to a school system or to a rehab counselor, we might recommend very specific devices." However, she adds, those recommendations are based on devices the consumer has tried and selected. "We are very much consumer driven. We may show the consumer several keyboards, for example, and they will pick one and say, 'That's the one I like and that's the one I'll use.' Then, that's the one we'll recommend."

Today, she remarks, "there's a multiplicity of AT choices exponentially greater than 20 years ago when the Tech Act centers were being formed and AT as we know it today was still new. Therefore, it's difficult to say what is best. We try to remain neutral and say 'This device does this but it doesn't do that.' We might show a consumer several alternative devices but I would be clear in explaining to that consumer how each device differs in capability."

Often, she says, she is asked by families, "Why is the technology so expensive?" She responds to that question, she says, by explaining the factors that contribute to AT manufacturer pricing decisions, including the need for manufacturers to recoup their research and development costs, the price of component parts, and the difference in production costs between a computer based and a non-computer based product. She tells families that they need to be as savvy about purchasing technology as they are about purchasing a car, for example.

"We can show what we have but if it's a device we don't have we can refer the consumer to the manufacturer or to

a representative of the company to arrange an equipment trial," she notes.

### Information for AT Professionals

Families are not alone in their search for AT information. Even AT professionals at organizations like ETTAC are constantly hunting for information they can pass on to parents.

Keeping up with new AT information and new developments is a challenge that will grow more pronounced as time becomes even more precious, as sources of information continue to proliferate and as technology continues its hectic moment-to-moment evolution, Alice declares.

"There's always something to be found on the web or from a vendor or there's a product that's under development. Having enough time to develop an intimate knowledge of the technology is difficult," she comments. "That's why we've all had to specialize in certain areas, or take on knowledge of certain devices more than others. There are just too many choices for us to keep up with everything."

Ms. Wershing is responsible for finding ways to keep herself and her ETTAC colleagues up to date on AT advances and changes. "I bring in vendors and other relevant experts to keep us current. Consequently, we work very closely with several vendor representatives."

Nevertheless, she believes that other sources of information are needed for her and for other AT professionals. Until the recent past, she notes, regional seminar and workshop attendance was an effective way to remain current. The rapid uptick in fuel prices, however, has made traveling to such events burdensome, even a hardship, for many. She recommends web-based workshops as alternatives.

"Webinars (live webcasts) and blogs are wonderful ways to keep up," she declares. "During the last 20 years this field has exploded and there is so much to keep up with. Not that there wasn't a lot to keep up with 20 years ago but now there is more information available than any one person can absorb. And what exists is constantly being added to."

She keeps a list of webinars and blogs that she continuously updates as she discovers new ones. "I try to monitor them all and digest the information. If vendor reps are in the neighborhood we'll invite them to give us an information update."

Conference attendance, she remarks, "is one of the best ways to keep up. I just attended my first conference in several years – I'm a single mother so it's not easy to get away and travel. In the past, however, I attended all of them, including CSUN, ATIA and Closing the Gap. Depending on my current area of interest I also attend relevant seminars when

they are available.”

Ms. Wershing’s travel constraints make online information gathering a necessity. “That’s why webinars are so effective. It’s great when webinars are archived so that you can go back and listen to them at your leisure. Most of the vendors conduct some kind of webinar activity or an online wiki. That is very helpful and has really taken off in the past couple of years. Many companies have the mechanism to set up an individual Go-to-Meeting or WebEx training where vendors can show AT professionals what we need to learn. We pass all of that knowledge and information to the families who come to us.”

To keep ETTAC families informationally current she recommends that they attend trainings at ETTAC offices “because a session may be specific to a particular piece of equipment.” She also recommends training at other sites. “If clients need to learn an operating system, for example, we might send them to a free training at our public library, which conducts basic training in that area. Senior centers also perform the same function.”

### Aiding Rural Families

The hills around Knoxville are populated by rural families, many of whom are isolated, poor and without computer access. “Computer access there has been an issue,” Alice says “but it’s my experience that that is now changing. More people now at least have a home computer.”

ETTAC, she says, has aided rural families in obtaining computers. “The computers we’ve found for them aren’t necessarily current or fast. We still have pockets of areas for which Internet access is tricky. Some people are still on dial-up, but at least they have dial-up. Because we have our device reutilization program, and we have regular information going into the newspaper, consumers are aware we are a place where they can come to get a computer.”

Rural families learn about ETTAC “from someone they know or know of who’s obtained a computer from us, or they’ve seen an article in the newspaper about us, or we will have had an event and they might pick up a press release there and will call us and tell us about a family member in a certain situation and ask us what we can do to help.”



Even in the most isolated rural surroundings, Ms. Wershing says, families understand how important technology is to their lives and seek ways to access it. “These people would at least like to have email.”

Even in the past 2-3 years the number of Alice’s clients, rural and otherwise, with computer access has significantly increased, “but the requirements of the technology have changed dramatically during the same time period. We have some computers that we loan out that are very obviously too old for smooth Internet access, but they remain capable of providing word processing and other capabilities to families who have had none.”

Often the consumers to whom ETTAC loans aging computers “are saving up until they have enough money to buy technology that’s more up to date. Saving to buy new technology is an aspiration that stands a good chance of being realized whereas a few years ago maybe not.”

Although ETTAC has no satellite offices “we provide service as families call us. As the need for our travel has increased – and as the price of gasoline has skyrocketed – it’s more difficult for families to get to us. Unfortunately, it’s also becoming, for the same reason, increasingly difficult for us to get to them. If a family can come to Knoxville, the equipment is here and available. Unfortunately, some of the equipment does not travel well. That issue is always a topic of discussion at our annual staff retreat.”

### Working with Schools

ETTAC, Alice explains, works with schools on a fee-for-service schedule. “We are currently working with 10 schools in the East Tennessee area. We are there to show the technology, to provide answers to questions and issues for individual students. That’s an area where we would be making specific recommendations.”



Parents, she asserts, “are considered very important members of our team. We have to be mindful that we need to work in conjunction with the team, the parent and the school staff so that the recommendations that are made are ones that will be followed through.”

“We certainly can recommend what we have seen a child use that we think would be beneficial in a specific classroom situation. But that does not ensure that the piece of equipment we recommend will be chosen.” The final determination, she notes, rests with the team at the school.

In its relationships with school systems, Alice says, ETTAC sometimes finds itself in the role of an advocate on behalf of the organization’s family clients.

“We try very hard to avoid placing ourselves between a family and a school system. Different parents are going to advocate for services for their children in different ways.”

Some parents, she says, may not be able to advocate at all, a situation that Ms. Wershing encounters often. “In those cases we work directly with the school. If the parent is unavailable or unable to be an active participant then we evaluate the student and work with the school to determine what is going to be best for that child.”

**Working Closely with Other Family Support Organizations**  
ETTAC and other Tech Act organizations are close collaborators, Alice says. “The Tech Act centers in Tennessee work very closely together because we are all part of the Alliance for Technology Access. If I receive a call from a family in Memphis – maybe they were surfing the web and found us – I would refer them to the Memphis center, for example and vice versa.”

“We often get calls from families that have moved out of state and are looking for certain services, or a family resides in the Knoxville area but has a family member who lives in another state. In the latter case we refer that family member to the nearest Alliance center or to another organization, maybe a PTI, in that family member’s home state.”

Her goal is to remain up to date about which organizations supply what services in which locations “so that if we need to refer a family to a speech pathologist, for example, or to a company that does vehicle modifications, we can do so quickly.”

ETTAC, she notes, has an expanded information service which staff can use when helping families. “We can refer families to a number of agencies to see what they can gain access to and to available funding sources.”

Despite all the visibility AT has acquired in the past few years, she says, “many families who come to us for the first time still have some difficulty in understanding exactly what AT is. I encounter this very often. When I identify myself as a professional who works with AT I’m asked, ‘What’s that?’ For those who have no knowledge of what it is that we do it and who therefore lack a frame of reference, it can be challenging sometimes to describe the services we provide.”

### **“We’ve Been There; We Understand.”**

ETTAC first-timers are often made to feel more comfortable during their introduction to AT and the world of disabilities because two ETTAC staffers are parents of grown children with disabilities, providing an empathetic perspective, Ms. Wershing says.

“Our director and the woman who does much of our resource work are parents. We have three part-time staff members with disabilities. I am a sibling with a younger brother on the autism spectrum. All of this tells parents and their kids. ‘We’ve been there; we understand.’”



Alice’s own situation is a case in point, she says. “My brother, because he is on the autism spectrum, doesn’t qualify for services because he is not cognitively delayed. I understand the frustration in trying to make a life better for someone who has a disability when there is no funding readily available. Jean, who is on our staff, can speak to another family from her own level of experience. She can talk about how she’s provided for her daughter and how, for example, one walks through an insurance denial process. She can do this better than I can because I have not experienced what she has experienced.

“Our family experience does not influence our perspective, it adds to it. That’s one of the ways we refer families to staff members; we do it according to the staff member’s family background.”

### **Improving Access to Technology Is the Trend**

Improving access to technology is the major trend now in AT product development, Alice states. “The general population has access to a cellphone. How can that device be made accessible to someone with a disability? The general population has access to the Internet, to iPods. How do we gain access to current trends in technology for families of children with disabilities and adults with disabilities as well? We’ll need to answer that question soon.”

She acknowledges the movement from print to electronic media, a trend that will also gain momentum in the next few years. “More and more services like Bookshare and Recordings for the Blind are available, as well as electronic text on the Internet.” NIMAS standards will likely mandate accessibility of such products in the near future, she predicts.

In the software arena, she says, “companies continue to produce software for skill development. There are more open-ended tools now than there were many years ago and they are more easily available. They enable us to take a piece of curriculum or a skill and embed it into software, which allows the user to have customized content.”

She expects to see a continuing proliferation of devices

aimed at accommodating access to software and hardware in order to facilitate universal use. "Many of those devices are expensive," she says, "but we're seeing their growing migration to the lower cost category, especially devices currently advertised in TV commercials, such as those that allow hearing impaired individuals to receive better sound quality from their televisions. Enlarged text or cellphones that are devoid of most options also fit into that category, she notes. "As the Baby Boomer population ages this trend will mushroom, and that will benefit not only senior citizens but families of kids with disabilities as well."

## RESOURCES

### ARTICLES

#### **Recommended Practices and Parent Perspectives Regarding AT Use in Early Childhood**

By M. Jeanne Wilcox, Lauren M. Dugan, Philippa H. Campbell and Amy Guimond  
JSET (Fall 2006)

The authors present evaluations of parents' perspectives on AT and its successful or unsuccessful use for infants and toddlers. Employing a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI), multiple choice survey (including agree/disagree belief statements) of 924 parents or family members of young children with disabilities, researchers evaluated trends in AT use, procurement and funding for young children with disabilities. Recognizing that the survey represents a parent or family member perspective on AT and AT best practices, the research team found that "the perspectives reported by the parents and family members in our survey do not suggest that they experienced recommended practices." Write the authors, "Results indicate that for the most part, families identifying, using and paying for various devices do so without professional assistance. Further, most devices they have tried, or are trying, are perceived as having limited success. When these results are considered with regard to previous research addressing provider perspectives in relation to families, substantive differences are apparent. To maximize early intervention outcomes using AT in early intervention, families may benefit from increased collaboration with their early intervention providers."

<http://jset.unlv.edu/20/JSETv21n4.pdf>

#### **A Day in the Life of a Deaf Student**

By Abigail Leichman  
Help Kids Hear.org (2005)

Writes the author about the subject of her article, "It is often hard to be completely understanding of individuals

with disabilities. The only way to understand the barriers in a person's life is to listen to their stories and become sensitive to their struggles." Ms. Leichman relates the challenges of Gerson, a second-year professional and technical communications major at Rochester Institute of Technology who has been deaf since she was 3½ years old. "[Gerson] is awakened in the morning with a Sonic Boom Alarm Clock with Bed Shaker, which rouses her for a 10 o'clock effective speaking class. During class if Gerson has a question, she types it into her laptop and a captioner voices it for her, and then types the answer. After class, a transcript is available on the university's website for review purposes. This is called C-Print and enables her to interact 'real time' with her professors and classmates." To maintain communication with family and friends, Gerson uses a pager which vibrates indicating an incoming message.

The author continues, "While most of the 1,100 hard-of-hearing students on the RIT campus use e-mail and instant messaging to communicate with friends and family, they too have vibrating two-way pagers designed for people with hearing loss. These devices include a phone and have the capability to text hearing friends who have cell phones. This pager is so important that Gerson cannot imagine life without it."

<http://www.helpkidshear.org/news/media/2005/04-02-2005-jersey.htm>

#### **Unheard Voices and the Right to Communicate: Augmentative Communication**

By Patrick Brune  
PBS Parents (2007)

This short article, written by the augmentative communication coordinator of the Parkside School in New York, is aimed at families that are beginning the search for basic information about ways to help a child who is not developing speech and language skills as expected. According to Mr. Brune, even when early delays are identified, and speech therapy has been initiated, it may still be desirable to investigate AAC devices as a way for a child to make his/her wishes known to others. The author encourages parents to ask their child's teacher, therapist or other health professional to assist in obtaining an evaluation through a local school district or nearby college or university program, an initiative that can be undertaken as soon as a delay in acquiring and using speech becomes evident.

Mr. Brune advocates the use of no-tech or low-tech strategies but also recommends high tech solutions. He writes, "A child can press a button or picture on a communication device that actually says a pre-programmed word or message. This is called a voice output commu-

nication aid (VOCA) and is another way AAC can help a child communicate better at home, school, and in the community. For example, a child can press pictures of herself, drink, and juice, which create a message spoken by the computer ('I want juice') and is easily understood by everyone."

This type of computer, he adds, "is used in much the same way as the picture symbol communication board, however the pictures or words are programmed into the computerized communication device. There are many different types of voice output communication aids available, and all provide different options that can meet a child's physical, cognitive, and communication needs." <http://www.pbs.org/parents/inclusivecommunities/augmentative.html>

## GUIDES

### AAC Resources for Families

By Pam Harris

ConnSense Bulletin (2005)

This extensive document includes a variety of information about AT resources for families. Written by the parent of a child with multiple disabilities who uses AAC, each section contains a short overview and opinion along with references for books, magazines, and links to web sites. The author has also interspersed activities that promote reading skills and advocacy skills. Contents include AT, planning for future needs, and finding skilled professionals. <http://www.connsensebulletin.com/AACResources.pdf>

### Five Assistive Technologies You Should be Aware Of Nomensa (2006)

Targeted at families beginning to utilize technology as well as website developers designing training websites for professionals, this article spotlights a list of five devices and software that can be useful to children with special needs: 1. mouth or head wands; 2. speech enabled websites; 3. screen magnifiers; 4. voice recognition software; and 5. the browser. The document features a definition of each of the five devices accompanied by a brief description of how each device is used and by whom.

<http://www.nomensa.com/resources/articles/five-assistive-technologies-you-should-be-aware-of.html>

### Good Toys for Blind Kids

National Organization of Parents of Blind Children  
National Federation of the Blind (2004)

Compiled by parents of blind children, the article is an appropriate starter list for families of children who are blind. The toys discussed are grouped together in three

lists according to manufacturers' age recommendations. The lists consist primarily of off-the-shelf toys available at toy stores. Exceptions are toys, games, activity books, puzzles and youth activities with Braille identifiers. These are denoted by clickable links to the National Federation for the Blind website. Within each age category are sub-groups such as balls, blocks and puzzles, musical and talking toys and educational toys. Order this list from:

National Federation of the Blind

1800 Johnson Street

Baltimore, MD 21230

Phone: (410) 659-9314

Fax: (410) 685-5653

[http://www.nfb.org/nfb/NOPBC\\_Toys\\_for\\_Blind\\_Kids.asp?SnID=1057118362](http://www.nfb.org/nfb/NOPBC_Toys_for_Blind_Kids.asp?SnID=1057118362)

## WEBSITES

### Project SPARKLE

SKI-HI Institute

SPARKLE, a website for parents of children who are deaf/blind, serves as a portal to relevant information and resources. The project offers enhanced learning opportunities at home by providing educational resources via DVD technology and the Internet. A child profile database program aids families in the collection of information specific to their children. Parents are encouraged to share the results of their research with educators, service providers and medical personnel. A Family Room provides parents access to a compilation of family stories. SPARKLE also provides a listserv and a video library where parents, via their home computers, can view webcasts by deaf/blindness professionals.

<http://www.sparkle.usu.edu/>

### Ability Online Support Network

The Ability Online Support Network was created in 1991 as a local bulletin board, but has since grown to include members worldwide. The network is a free Internet community where children and young people with disabilities, and their families, can exchange messages and participate in online activities in a safe environment. Registration is free. A chat room is advertised for one hour a week. Chat subjects are called "conferences" and cover a wide range of subjects for children and their parents or caregivers. Games are available, and birthdays of members are noted.

<http://www.ablelink.org/public/default.htm>

### Fun with Letters

Chateau Meddybemps

Helpful for teachers and families seeking to encourage children with disabilities to learn and copy letters, Fun

with Letters (FWL) is a unit of Chateau Meddybemps, a website created to help children learn the alphabet and progress toward the writing of stories. FWL features a Writing Guide and an Alphabet Practice Pad. A letter, either lower or upper case, is selected in the writing guide. The selection brings up a sheet of lined paper and a cartoon figure draws the letter. This repeats until another action is taken. The Alphabet Practice Pad enables the learner to draw using the mouse and copy a letter made by the Spinner, an animated spider character. Other FWL areas provide tips for learning about letters via discussion and then locating examples of the letters' shapes. Scrapbooks can be made of the letters and stories created. [http://www.meddybemps.com/letterary/guide\\_and\\_archives.html](http://www.meddybemps.com/letterary/guide_and_archives.html)

## VIDEOS

A Day in the Life of Richard

By Richard Devylder

State of California, Employment Development Department (2005)

For people with mobility issues, navigating any environment can be a daunting task. This short video shows an entire day in the life of an individual born without legs or arms. He grew up in a supportive foster family that raised him as a typical child. Although challenged physically, he and his family have developed alternative methods for him to live independently, be gainfully employed and lead a fulfilling life. The short video is beneficial for families and for vocational rehabilitation professionals.

<http://www.edd.ca.gov/ndeam/ndeam05-1.htm>

### Assistive Videos on Computer Accessibility

Assistiveware

This website prepared by AssistiveWare features videos demonstrating the use of computers by individuals with several different disabilities. Each video is about 4 minutes in duration. While half of these demonstrations are related to games and gaming, others show a young girl with athetoid cerebral palsy who uses her computer at home and school, a woman who helps her husband with his research, a young man with spinal muscle atrophy who searches the internet for interesting ingredients and recipes, which are then cooked by his mother, and a woman who is blind and translates from French to English using her computer. These videos may all be viewed on the computer but are also available to teachers in full size, 720 x 576 pixels or 1280 x 720 for HD videos. Software programs featured include Key Strokes, Touch Strokes and SwitchXS. Featured computers are Macintosh.

[http://assistiveware.com/videos.php?video=Elina\\_hughes&format=mp4](http://assistiveware.com/videos.php?video=Elina_hughes&format=mp4)

## KNOWLEDGE NETWORK MEMBERS

### East Tennessee Technology Access Center (ETTAC)

Founded in 1988, ETTAC provides technology solutions to individuals with disabilities in 24 East Tennessee counties. Since its inception, ETTAC has expanded from a part-time staff located in space donated by the University of Tennessee to its present location in a 6,000-square foot facility staffed by 11 trained professionals. ETTAC services can be accessed at its offices or at recipients' homes, schools, workplaces or nursing homes. Services are priced on a sliding scale; however no one is denied services due to inability to pay. The center's AT-related services include:



- Equipment and software demonstrations of AT
- Recycled AT
- Consultations, evaluations and assessments for individuals, families, schools and other agencies
- Programs for children and adults with disabilities
- Workshops and trainings
- Curricular modifications
- Adaptations of worksites, hardware, software and toys
- Loan of hardware, toys and AT devices
- Information on ADA, laws and community services
- Advocacy and funding information

For more information contact:

East Tennessee Technology Access Center  
4918 North Broadway, Knoxville, TN 37918

Phone: (865) 219-0130 (voice/TTY)

Fax: 865) 219-0137

Contact: Lois Symington, Executive Director

Email: [etstactn@aol.com](mailto:etstactn@aol.com)

<http://www.kornet.org/ettac>

### Alabama Parent Education Center (APEC)



APEC operates the Alabama Network for Children with Disabilities and the Alabama Statewide Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC). Alabama PIRC objectives include:

- Assisting parents in low performing schools in their understanding of the Alabama Accountability Sys-

tem

- Creating a statewide network of trained parent leaders
- Providing state and local technical assistance to support increased parental involvement activities
- Supplying early childhood services to families and supporting local early childhood programs in urban and rural settings

For additional information on APEC or the Alabama PIRC, contact:

Alabama Parent Education Center  
10520 US Highway 231

Wetumka, AL 36092

Phone: (334) 567-2252; (866) 532-7660 (toll free in Alabama)

Fax: (334) 567-9938

<http://www.alabamaparentcenter.com/>

Contact: Sherri Wilson, Alabama PIRC Director

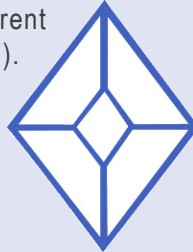
Email: [staff@alabamaparentcenter.com](mailto:staff@alabamaparentcenter.com)

### Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education Training and Support (Wisconsin FACETS)

WI FACETS operates a statewide Parent Training and Information Center (PTI).

The organization's services include:

- Public awareness and information dissemination
- Parent education
- Parent support
- Promotion of partnership activities between parents and professionals
- Parent leadership development



The center offers an array of parent-centered publications, video trainings, online workshops and a chat room.

For more information on WI FACETS, please contact:  
Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education Training and Support

2714 N. Dr. Martin Luther King Drive  
Milwaukee, WI 53212

Phone: (414) 374-4645

Toll-free: (877) 374-4677

TDD: (414) 374-4635

Fax: (414) 374-4655

<http://www.wifacets.org>

Contact: Courtney Salzer and Jan Serak, PTI Co-Directors

Email: [wifacets@wifacets.org](mailto:wifacets@wifacets.org)

### Kentucky Special Parent Involvement Network (KY-SPIN)

KY-SPIN provides training and information dissemination services while operating the following parent-oriented programs aimed at families of individuals with disabilities:



- SPIN PTI, a state-designated Parent Training and Information Center whose workshops annually attract 7,000 members of families of individuals with disabilities
- STRONG (Supporting Resources and Opportunities in Neighborhoods Grant) that operates three disability resource centers in metro Louisville
- PASS (Parents Accessing Systems of Support), which provides services and programs for non-diploma youths ages 14-21 with severe disabilities in low incident special education classes

KY-SPIN also offers online workshops, a family information guide and access to an information library.

For additional information, please contact:

KY-SPIN

10301 B Deering Road  
Louisville, KY 40272

Phone: (502) 937-6894; (800) 525-7746 (toll free)

Fax: (502) 937-6464

<http://www.kyspin.com/>

### Maine Parent Federation (MPF)

MPF is a statewide organization that provides information, education, advocacy and training programs to parents of children with disabilities and professionals. Programs include:

- SPIN, which is staffed by parents of children with disabilities, provides one-on-one information to parents and professionals regarding appropriate services, educational rights and specific disabilities via a toll free statewide phone number
- Maine PIRC, which provides printed materials for parent resource shelves, workshops for families on educational topics, facilitation for parent involvement strategic planning sessions, guidance on updating parent policies and compacts



and technical support for family involvement program development

A newsletter, information on camps, library facilities and online workshops are available for parents.

For more information, please contact:

Maine Parent Federation

12 Shuman Avenue, Suite #7

Augusta, ME 04338

Phone: (207) 623-2144

Toll-free (in Maine): (800) 870-7746

Fax: (207) 623-2144

<http://www.mpf.org/index.htm>

Email: [parenconnect@mpf.org](mailto:parenconnect@mpf.org)

### Parents Helping Parents of Santa Clara (PHP)

PHP provides lifetime guidance, supports and services to families of children with special needs and to professionals. AT services, via iTech include a preview and demonstration center for AT equipment, materials and software. PHP partners with dozens of organizations that provide support and information to PHP parents and families.



For further information, please contact:

Parents Helping Parents of Santa Clara

3041 Olcott Street

Santa Clara, CA 95054

Phone: (408) 727-5775

Fax: (408) 727-0182

<http://php.com/>

Email: [info@php.com](mailto:info@php.com)

### Oregon Parent Training and Information Center

The Oregon PTI is the statewide parent training and information facility. The PTI serves parents of children with disabilities from birth to age 26, parents of children with emotional and/or behavioral problems from birth to age 26 and education, medical and human services professionals. The PTI offers the following services:

- A lending library of videos and books
- Training on a variety of topics related to children with disabilities
- IEP partner training and matching
- Information and referral
- A special ed hot line

- A monthly email list of Oregon trainings
- A statewide conference
- A bimonthly newsletter

For more information, please contact:

Oregon Parent Training and Information Center

2288 Liberty Street NE

Salem, OR 97301

Phone: (503) 581-8156 (voice)

Toll-free: (888) 505-2673

Special education help line: (888) 891-6784

Fax: (503) 391-0429

<http://www.orpti.org/whatisorpti.htm>

Email: [info@orpti.org](mailto:info@orpti.org)

### Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN)

RIPIN has housed Rhode Island's designated Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) since 1991. PIRC programs include:

- Parent education
- Literacy development
- Violence prevention
- Development and strengthening of parent-school partnerships
- Birth to age five statewide programming
- A resource library that includes books, videos and tapes



For additional information, please contact:

Rhode Island Parent Information Network

175 Main Street

Pawtucket, RI 02860

Phone: (401) 727-4144

Toll-free: (800) 464-3399

<http://www.ripin.org/>

### South Dakota Parent Connection (SDPC)

SDPC is the state's PTI. Its services to families of individuals with disabilities include:

- A quarterly newsletter featuring articles about disability issues, including legislation and statewide activities
- A resource library that includes books, videos, printed materials, audios and children's books on a loan basis
- Workshops on topics impacting families of children with disabilities or special healthcare



needs

- An in-state toll free phone number for information or referral on special education laws and rights and their effect on families
- Distribution of information booklets and brochures
- Local community liaisons who work with families to access resources

Individualized assistance is provided to families:

- With children with newly diagnosed disabilities
- Whose children with disabilities are transitioning to pre-school, public school or a vocational program
- Who have recently relocated

For additional information, please contact:

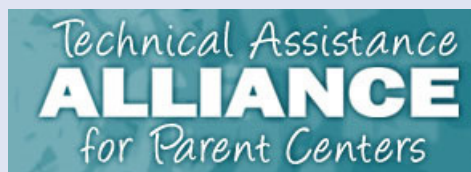
South Dakota Parent Connection  
3701 W. 49th Street, Suite 102  
Sioux Falls, SD 57100

<http://www.sdparent.org/>

Email: [sdpc@sdparent.org](mailto:sdpc@sdparent.org)

#### Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers

The Alliance is a partnership of one national and six regional parent technical



assistance centers. These seven entities comprise a unified technical assistance system serving the more than 100 PTIs and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRC) established under IDEA. The national and regional parent technical assistance centers act to strengthen connections to the U.S. Department of Education's Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network while fortifying partnerships between PTIs and education systems at the local, state and national levels.

The Alliance National Center supports PTIs through standardized publications, unified data collection, national conferences and institutes, webinars, a monthly e-newsletter, management and nonprofit expertise. Alliance Regional Centers conduct annual regional conferences and facilitate individualized center assistance plans. Other activities include training, conducting conference calls and making center site visits.

For more information, please contact:

PACER Center  
8161 Normandale Blvd.

Minneapolis, MN 55437-1044

Phone: (952) 838-9000

Toll-free: (888) 248-0822

TTY: (952) 838-0190 (711 Relay)

Fax: (952) 838-0199

<http://www.taalliance.org>

Email: [alliance@taalliance.org](mailto:alliance@taalliance.org)

#### Tech-Able

Tech-Able provides information and resources about assistive technology to families, educators, disability professionals and others. Through its lending library, the center offers access to a range of AT devices, from low-tech to high-tech. As the organization has grown, it has expanded the services it offers, providing information and referral, consultations for individuals who are blind or have vision impairments, demonstrations and evaluations. They also offer special services throughout the year, including tax preparation, group training, conference presentations, and community event tickets.



For more information on Tech-Able, please contact:

1114 Brett Drive; Suite 100

Conyers, Georgia 20094

Contact: Cassandra Baker, Executive Director

Phone: (770) 922-6768

Fax: (770) 922-6769

<http://www.techable.org/>

Email: [info@techable.org](mailto:info@techable.org)

#### Team of Advocates for Special Kids (TASK)

TASK is a non-profit organization that serves families of children from birth to 22 years of age. Their mission is to provide individuals with disabilities the tools and



skills they need to reach their maximum potential. To do this, they offer advocacy information, workshops and information in English, Spanish and Vietnamese.

TASK's TECH Center is available to children, parents, adult consumers, and professionals as a place to learn about assistive technology. The TECH Center offers software and adaptive equipment trials, to help determine what best suits an individual child. Their 10 com-

puters serve as platforms for demonstrating over 950 software titles and a variety of other types of adaptive equipment such as alternative keyboards, trackballs, mice and switches. Through their lending library program, TASK members can check out up to three software titles at a time for a one month period.

The TECH Center also offers families one-on-one assistive technology evaluations. These evaluations work to match individuals with the appropriate software to meet their specific needs. Training is also available.

TASK's TECH Center provides time for students and their families to come in after school and in the summer. After School TECH Time provides children with access to a computer to complete homework assignments and projects. Camp TECHie is for school-aged children of all abilities and their parents. The goal of the Camp is to help reinforce social skills, academic skills, and gross and fine motor skills with the use of assistive technology, arts and crafts projects, and group activities. Lastly, Toddler TECH Time serves children ages 0-5 and their parents, allowing them to try out switch-adapted toys, adaptive computer equipment, cause-and-effect software, and other developmentally appropriate toys and computer software.

For more information on TASK, please contact:  
100 W. Cerritos Avenue  
Anaheim, CA 92805  
Toll-free (in California): (866) 828-8275  
Phone: (714) 533-8275  
Fax: (714) 533-2533  
<http://www.taskca.org>  
Email: [taskca@yahoo.com](mailto:taskca@yahoo.com)

### Michigan's Integrated Technology Supports (MITS)

MITS works to increase the capability of Michigan school districts to address the AT needs of students with disabilities. To that end, they provide information services, support materials, technical assistance and training opportunities. They also maintain a lending library of software and AT equipment.

MITS responds to individual information requests, conducting research to provide current information on AT products, services and service providers. They main-



tain a collection of catalogs, reprints and publications to assist assistive technology personnel in the schools. MITS also provides in-service training opportunities, workshops, and seminars for educators and disability professionals. Among the publications they distribute are the following:

- Using Microsoft Word Tools to Differentiate for Diverse Learners
- Assistive Technology Supports for Early Childhood Literacy
- Assistive Technology for Students Who Require Additional Learning Resources
- Comparison of Text Readers

For more information on MITS, please contact:  
1037 South U.S. 27  
St. Johns, MI 48879-2424  
Toll-Free: (800) 274-7426  
Phone: (989) 224-0333  
TTY: (989) 224-0246  
Fax: (989) 224-0330  
<http://www.cenmi.org/mits/>  
Email: [mits@edzone.net](mailto:mits@edzone.net)

Project Director: Jacqueline Hess  
Newsletter Editor: Thomas H. Allen  
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